DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 429 EA 025 623

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TITLE The Balkanisation of Power in Australian Education: Political Lessons from the Recent Collapse of National Partnership in Policy Making.
PUB DATE Sep 93
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the British Educational Management and Administration Society (Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom, September 10-11, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; *Decentralization; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Federal State Relationship; Foreign Countries; Government Role; *Policy Formation; *Politics of Education; *State Boards of Education
IDENTIFIERS *Australian Education Council

ABSTRACT

During the Perth meeting of the Australian Education Council (AEC) on July 1-2, 1993, policy making power shifted from the AEC to the states and from Labor to non-Labor ministers. Labor ministerial power directed public education through much of the 1980s, when the rhetoric of national partnership was all-pervasive. At the July conference, the non-Labor State Ministers of Education ambushed the AEC policy processes and reasserted their constitutional rights. A balkanization of powers occurred whose implications are only now being analyzed. This paper explores three questions. Why were many educational policy makers so ill prepared for and resentful of the ambush? Should learning communities and systems now foster educative forms of local governance and accountability to reconstruct policy legitimacy? Can a rhetoric of partnership in education too easily legitimate the distribution of power and make local educational managers insensitive and vulnerable to shifts in political context? State politicians and administrators are now moving to recapture the steerage of education policy, claiming states' rights. However, the "ambush" could provide the Commonwealth with an excuse to make further cuts in state education funding, reintroduce tied grants to exert leverage on states' policy making, or make tagged grants available directly to schools to undercut each state's power. A politically critical culture is needed in educational management to ensure that power distribution is regularly reviewed. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/MLH)

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ED 371 429

THE BALKANISATION OF POWER IN AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION: POLITICAL LESSONS FROM THE RECENT COLLAPSE OF NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP IN POLICY MAKING

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Paper given at the British Educational Management and Administration Society Conference, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh 10-11 September 1993.

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Abstract

The Perth meeting of the Australian Education Council (AEC) July 1-2 was the scene of a dramatic shift in the politics of Australian education. The power shifted from the AEC to the States. It also shifted from Labor to non-Labor Ministers.

AEC Watchers will be aware that collective Labor ministerial power was directing public education through much of the 1980s. The rhetoric of national partnership was all pervasive. Ministerial and bureaucratic powers were aggregated to the extent where the AEC and its agencies were able to exercise oligarchic dominance in education policy making. At the July 1-2 meeting in Perth, however, the non-Labor States Ministers of Education ambushed the AEC policy processes and reasserted their constitutional rights. A balkanisation of powers occurred and the implications are only now being analysed.

Three questions act as themes to this paper. Why were many educational policy makers so ill prepared for, and deeply resentful of the ambush? Should learning communities and systems now foster educative forms of local governance and accountability to reconstruct policy legitimacy? Can a rhetoric of partnership in education can too easily shroud, ingratiate and legitimate the distribution of power to the extent where educational managers can become insensitive and vulnerable to shifts in the political context?

EA 025623

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Knowing Power

In his classic text, *Towards a Philosophy of Administration,* Christopher Hodgkinson (1978: 217-222), argued that "Power is the first term in the administrative lexicon." He went on with his remorseless logic to show that "Administrative power is the function of the will .... The contest of wills is the pragmatic test of power .... Authority is legitimised power ... Authority transcends logic .... [and that] ... The term leadership is an incantation for the bewitchment of the led".

If power is the first word in the language of administration, then, in the beginning, in Australia, there was no national word on education, and therefore, no national power. Or to put it more accurately, the Commonwealth's (Federal) constitution of 1901 made no mention of education. This is why it was generally accepted that education was a residual power of State Governments and Territory officials. As Birch (1975) showed, even constitutional amendments only marginally increased the powers of Commonwealth governments over the years to determine education policy. So, how did the AEC acquire its power?

The AEC generated National Cooperation

The AEC was established in 1936. It was an off-the-record setting where Ministers of Education could share experiences. As Spaull's (1987) history of the AEC shows, it was kept peripheral to education policy making for many decades. Alternative means of Federal intervention developed very slowly (Harman and Smart, 1982). The slow pace of change related to the bitterness of the traditional territorial disputes between Federal and State Ministers and their respective teams of senior officials (Spaull, 1987:199).

In June 1988, however, in a context of major and shared economic crises, the Ministers of the AEC came to the view, a Labor majority backed view it should be noted, that cooperation could secure major and mutual benefits. They established a Working Party on Co-operative Structures to consider the purposes, governance and management of national agencies. And here we find support to Hodgkinson's line that 'Administrative power is the function of the will'. The Ministers' collective will was exerted to adjust the nature of working relationships between administrators in their portfolios to one purpose; mutual benefit. That is the stuff of alliances. Mutual benefit.

The Policy Outcomes of National Cooperation

The major national agencies of the time, the AEC Secretariat, the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER), the Australian Schools Cataloguing and Information Service (ASCIS) and the Technical and Further Education National Centre for Research and Development (TAFE R&D) were reviewed with view to amalgamation and rationalisation.

Interim reports to the AEC meetings in July and October 1988 led to four far-reaching decisions (reviewed by Kennedy, 1990:6-7);

- to leave the AEC Secretariat and the TAFE R&D much as they were,
- to mount a national 'curriculum mapping' exercises under the management of the Conference of Directors General (ie. undertaken by the Directors of Curriculum in each State and Territory),
- to rationalise the ACER, the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC), and the ASCIS, and
- that there should be national goals for schooling which should be the basis for future Commonwealth funding arrangements for school level education, basic skills testing and program evaluation.

The final report of the Co-operative Structures Working Party was made to the April 1989 AEC meeting in Hobart, Tasmania. Five historic decisions were made;

(1) leave the ACER alone but rationalise its Council (then 27),

(2) the Ministers should establish a private company owned by them to be called the Curriculum Corporation of Australia (CCA) and to provide the services traditionally associated with the CDC and the ASCIS,

(3) the CCA was to be considered a more co-operative venture than the CDC to ensure that the States retained and felt strong ownership,

(4) the CCA's operating capital would be assembled by combining the resources of the existing ASCIS, a core grant *per capita* from each state, and the savings achieved by winding up the CDC, and

(5) all States and Commonwealth agencies agreed to a set of National Goals of Schooling.

Practical Outcomes

The responses were complex, and I have discussed them in detail elsewhere (Macpherson, 1991) with particular reference to the development of the Curriculum Corporation. In essence, the AEC took charge of national curriculum development. They decided to develop, using an inter-state process, national curriculum framework statements and profiles in each area to guide planning by teachers and schools. The major vehicle for this process was the AEC's Curriculum and Assessment Committee (CURASS).

CURASS was large committee comprising nominees from four types of organisations. First were nominated senior officials from the schools curriculum divisions of State, Territory and Commonwealth education departments and ministries. Second were nominated senior officials from the agencies responsible for assessment and certification in each State and Territory. These two groups of officials vastly outnumbered members from the next two groups.

Third were nominees from 'peak' national stakeholder groups; non-government employers, and teachers and parents associations. Fourth were nominees from the New Zealand Ministry of Education, the Australian Council for Educational Research and the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

The purpose of the arrangements was clear - CURASS was designed to hold consultations, reach decisions relatively quickly and then to plan implementation State by State with the support of AEC and its Curriculum Corporation. And it did. Until the July AEC meeting when the process got ambushed.

Six Political Problems

The first problem of many was that the distribution of power on CURASS attempted to control rather than facilitate the contest of wills. The officials, quite understandably, saw education services from a provider perspective and significantly outweighed all other interests; such as client groups and expert research services. Many other groups were simply not given standing.

That generated a vicious politics of contested standing. Intense lobbying by subject associations, for example, was contained, but nearly led to the exclusion of parents and teachers. This was a high risk strategy and indicated just how tightly the Ministers and their officials wanted to keep the process to themselves. As events last week showed, that contest over standing helped generate a lobbying dynamic that the non-Labor Ministers felt, in time, that they dare not ignore.

The second problem was that the AEC/CURASS process identified five learning areas (later eight) across the curriculum of primary and secondary schools. Put another way, this reduced the sum total of our history, thought and experience over millennia into 'eight key learning areas'. CURASS also reduced the wonderfully complex and infinitely subtle interactive processes that characterise teaching and learning, as a whole, over time, into 'achievement levels'. Further, CURASS reduced the partially understood cognitive miracle of understanding and our imperfect grasp of what others believe they know and can apparently use into profiles of outcomes, or, as some suspected, basic competencies.

This reductionism offended many experts, particularly those not privy to the process. It led, therefore, to marginally plausible curriculum products being too easily seen as a new official rhetoric, a standard edu-babble, a tight system of icons and symbols that could be used to explain, to direct and to legitimise what was to happen in Australian classrooms. This new language about curriculum scope, sequence and intended outcomes, it was presumed, would obtain improved outcomes for kids. Many in Australian education, especially those close to or actually involved in the CURASS process, accepted these products as a 'good thing'. But recall here Hodgkinson's view that "the term leadership is an incantation for the bewitchment of the led." Involvement, participation, even partnership, are not guarantors of expertise, especially in the eyes of the disenfranchised.

The third problem was, therefore, the collapse of legitimacy. The AEC and CURASS certainly had the Authority to do what they did. When they started out on this process they had behind them pooled Ministerial power, and that power was technically derived

from the ballot box in each State. Recent elections, however, had altered the balance of power between Labor and non-Labor members. The policy process made no acknowledgment of the changed basis of legitimacy. The AEC's committees, having accepted legitimacy from the ballot box, then distanced themselves from the changing basis of political legitimacy. They were comforted and blinded by a rhetoric of national partnership.

To recall; Authority is legitimised power. And the political legitimacy of the AEC/CURASS process had been eroded by two factors. The numbers had shifted from Labor to Non-Labor Ministers. Intense lobbying by excluded interest groups encouraged the non-Labor Ministers to caucus, to organise the numbers and then to use their constitutional rights.

The fourth problem was the inflexibility of the national policy process, an inflexibility cemented in by fixated notions of partnership. In education policy making, legitimacy is, as indicated above, often determined by process criteria such as inclusion or exclusion, sometimes irrespective of expertise. The Labor AEC Ministers, most officials and the Curriculum Corporation believed that their network of beliefs about frameworks, areas, profiles and levels exhibited a coherent and compelling educational logic. They have argued since July 1-2 that adequate consultation had occurred and that all views had been heard. On both process and substantive matters they claimed the advantage of knowing that they were right.

The evidence is, however, that there were other Ministers and many other experts who took very different views. Hence, when the hegemonic rhetoric of the powerful partners was challenged, there could be no thought of compromise or adjusting the process. True believers and pragmatists talked past each other and the 'national process' was aborted.

The fifth problem was the contested nature of the Curriculum Profiles. Take the Arts, for example. More than 200 arts academics expressed concern that the Profiles were thinly veiled competencies. Competencies are an anathema to the Arts. Why? The visual and performing arts profile components appear to isolate complex performances from their explanatory contexts of belief and value. Tasks are rendered meaningless by their separation from the disciplines that provide essential concepts and meaning. Put simply, Profiles seemed to many to be conceptually inadequate and offensive to professional values.

The sixth problem was the coercive use of administrative power. For example, when the 200 Arts academics raised their objections to the profiles, the CURASS reportedly responded with enormous hostility. Even though trials in schools had uncovered a range of problems, the CURASS reacted aggressively, and foolishly told the Arts people that the Arts was "lucky to be included in the profiles". Such an abuse of administrative power is extremely unwise in any state with democratic aspirations and structures, and particularly so with the Guardians of the Arts. Hodgkinson's aphorisms cut both ways.

That is, when the led are no longer bewitched by the language of leadership, logic transcends authority. When educational logic transcends authority, administrative power in education loses its legitimacy. When their power loses its legitimacy, educational managers and their political masters can no longer control the contest of wills. In such circumstances, politicians and administrators must realign their position to regain influence. So what actually happened in Perth?

The Political Ambush

In essence, the four non-Labour states and the Northern Territory Government used their numbers to make three decisions;

(1) to scrap the AEC plan to implement national curriculum guidelines, profiles, key competencies and levels,

(2) to refer all curriculum matters back to the states for review and modification (Bruce, 1993:1), and

(3) to ask all AEC working parties and committees to wind up their activity by the 1st of September or to make a special case to the AEC's December meeting in Hobart.

There are about 150 such groups working for the AEC on national policies concerned with gender, equity, TAFE staffing and curriculum, fees and loan schemes, and training and labor-market programs.

Judging by the reported reactions (Bruce, 1993:4), the Labor and Commonwealth Ministers felt deeply aggrieved. They attacked the personal motives of the non-Labor

Ministers. Labor Minister Susan Lenahan, South Australia, for example, felt that it was "a disgrace to see personal agendas getting in the way of a national goal that I thought we had collectively agreed to right across the country." Matt Foley, Labor Minister of Education in Queensland, noted the years of "expert consultation" and that "when the time came for decisions the elected representatives simply dithered, baulked at the barrier, and want to send it back to the states. It is a gross failure of political will." The Commonwealth Minister, Mr Beazley, used a 'rail gauge' analogy to describe the decision (Muller, 1993:4), evoking a time when mindless parochialism held back national development.

Explaining the Ambush

With respect, these reactions by the ambushed provide an inadequate explanation for the ambush - which it most certainly was. The non-Labor Ministers caucused prior to the AEC meeting. This is not to argue that personal political motives did not play their part or that the non-Labor states are not philosophically hostile to Labor's centralist tendencies. They did, and they are, but they tell only part of the story of why the new alliances formed and why the non-Labor alliance decided to ambush the AEC infrastructure and policy process.

It is important to note that the actual objections raised by the non-Labor Ministers focussed on the quality, incontestability and purposes of the proposed profiles. Many also feared that profiles could too easily become a prescriptive national curriculum and the basis for examinations. Events in Britain are often cited. New South Wales also raised problems to do with implementation.

How were these fears and objections converted into political ammunition? By traditional lobbying processes. Take Maths for example. Professor Guttman at Melbourne University called for more rigour in the proposed Maths profiles. His petition attracted about 200 academic signatures across the nation. It demanded an independent review.

Separately from Arts and Maths, the Australian Academy of Science found that the science materials lacked rigour and used a controversial sociology of science (Muller, 1993:4). Protests have were also made by the national Institute of Physics, and by national academic and professional groups in English, Languages Other Than English, society and the environment and physical education.

In each case these lobbyists argued that the proposed profiles used a flawed view of the skills that students require and that they could greatly damage curriculum (Aubert, 1994). The range and weight of these objections can not be dismissed easily, and indeed, were not refuted by the Labor Ministers.

How can we interpret and learn from these dramatic events?

- When the led were no longer bewitched by political and administrative leadership, alternative logics transcended authority.

- As new logics transcended political authority, the administrative power that underpinned the AEC infrastructure and processes lost its legitimacy.

- As this power lost its legitimacy, those in positions of authority could no longer control the contest of wills.

- In such circumstances, the politicians went searching for a new position that might attract collective legitimacy. Hence, the need for new alliances and ambushes to establish the new political order.

The New Political Order

State politicians and administrators are now moving to recapture the steerage of education policy. The re-capture is being explained using constitutional authority; the classic Australian evocation of 'states rights'. The greatest danger, however, is that the ambush could provide the Commonwealth with the excuse they might be seeking to

- further cut funds to state education,

- reintroduce tied grants to exert leverage on State's policy making or

- make tagged grants available directly to schools to undercut each State's power over their own schools.

In the meantime, there is little prospect of a bipartisan approach being used for some time to settle basic questions about educational purposes, processes and priorities. Instead, each State will now create its own agenda and timings. Most will actually use the frameworks, levels and profiles, but repackage them to reflect each State's perspectives. The smaller the state, and the lesser the financial flexibilities available, the more limited the repackaging will have to be. Somehow the Curriculum Corporation will try and coordinate the design and production of teaching materials.

Conclusions

What will evaporate for some time will be the rhetoric of a national partnership in policy making. Most State Ministers will need to refurbish their curriculum policy making and implementation machinery if they are to offer anything more than general guidelines to their schools.

This means that, given the national policy vacuum, increasingly feral schools will need to create a substantial degree of legitimacy for themselves. Each school will need to have its own policy governance structure that generates policy legitimacy in addition to the day-to-day management of people, curriculum and resources.

Hence the need for educative leaders who will accept responsibility for building learning communities that include all stakeholders in the processes of evaluating, reporting and improving services. An integrated approach to evaluation, reporting and planned improvement will need to focus on the quality of teaching, learning and leadership to be both convincing and effective. The performance indicators for leaders who would be educative in such circumstances are as follows;

- they develop and maintain an effective inquiry and problem-solving climate in their domain,

- they respect different points of view and accept criticism as the key ingredient in the growth of knowledge within the organisation,

- they adapt to challenges and provide for change in policy or practices through participative feedback and reflection,

- they ensure that people have the freedom to fully participate in this process of learning and growth, and

- they justify their decisions on the basis of their contribution to the benefits of long-term learning within the organisation - the organisation itself becomes a moral construct of the learning community.

A rhetoric of partnership will not suffice in Australian national conditions at this time. It would be naive in a number of respects. In order to avoid oligarchic, balkanised or feral powers, educative leaders will need to raise the level of coherence between six distinctively different forms of service, each with a distinct purpose (Macpherson, 1993:49-50):

- wise philosophical guidance - to parents, students and colleagues on what is educationally right;

- sophisticated strategic analyses - of the situation to identify the truly significant, plural interests, socio-economic contexts, policy guidelines, resource levels and allocations, current organisation and options;

- responsible political action - to identify and reconcile clients' and providers' interests by nurturing micro-political processes wherein stakeholders negotiate touchstone values and 'our policy';

- proactive cultural agency - to mobilise commitment among learners, teachers and leaders, and to legitimate improved professional practices;

- responsive managerial services - to governors, teachers and learners through supportive organisation that focuses on the achievable; and

- responsible formative evaluation - to provide feedback and reflection on the quality of learning, teaching and leadership, and to question the continuing appropriateness of education policies.

Such services would help educational policy makers anticipate and spring ambushes; even before they needed to form. Learning communities and systems would foster educative forms of local governance and accountability.

To conclude, a politically critical culture is needed in educational management to ensure that the distribution of power is regularly reviewed. To this end managers need to be sensitive to, responsive to and proactively engaged in the political context. Since nothing is possible in management without power, this conclusion could have universal application.

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